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ABSTRACT

This survey of economics graduates at the FernUniversitat found that relatively few students who enroll in the program pass the final exam. Full-time students have better graduation rates than part-time students, although the FernUniversitat considers the latter as its main target group. Full-time students on the average require the same number of semesters to earn a degree as students at conventional universities. On the average, part-time students require only three semesters more to complete their studies. With regard to study goals, the economics graduates attached greater importance to self-development than to obtaining better professional qualifications. The unemployment rate of the male graduates is extremely low (3%), but the female graduates have significantly more problems finding a first job. Their rate of unemployment is 19%. Two out of three of the graduates (female more often than male) improved their job positions after graduating from the FernUniversitat. (10 references) (Author/GL)

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GRADUATES OF THE FERNUNIVERSITÄT

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Abstract

In this paper the author presents some of the most interesting research findings from a survey of graduates of `Economics' at the FernUniversität (FeU). Only a relatively low percentage of students enrolled in this course pass the final exam. Full-time students have better graduation rates than part-time students, although the FeU counts the latter as their main target group. Full-time students at the FeU on average need the same number of semesters to earn a degree as students at conventional universities. On the average, part-time students need only three semesters more to complete their studies.

In regard to their study goals, the graduates of `Economics' are concerned, they attached greater importance to self-development than obtaining better professional qualifications.

The unemployment rate of the male graduates is extreemly low (3 %) but the female graduates have significantly more problems finding a first job. Their rate of unemployment is 19 %.

Two out of three of the graduates bettered their job position since graduating at the FeU, female graduates more often than male graduates.

Most of the graduates found that the degree of the FeU has the same value in the labour market as those conferred by conventional universities. Some employers even prefer graduates of the FeU, because they have a reputation for working harder than graduates from conventional universities.

Introduction

Graduates are a new subject of research at the FernUniversität (FeU) of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), because it takes a number of years until a relevant number of graduates have finished their degrees. The information obtained from successful students will assist the FeU in its work in the future.

In 1985 a first representative survey (**BARTELS 1986**) was carried out among the FeU graduates in 'Economics' because this course of studies has the largest number of graduates. The main aim of this survey was to gain insight into students' experience both at the FeU and after completing their studies. The results are useful for the FeU in judging the value and acceptance on the labour market of degrees, which were earned through distance education. In 1990 we will start a follow-up study concentrating on the personal and professional development of our graduates.

For the first survey we used a written questionnaire. The response rate of 77.5 % can be considered very high.

In this paper we will first present some selected statistical data about the graduates. We will then present some selected findings out of our research survey.

Selected graduate characteristics

In two out of five cases graduates lived in a university town during their distance studies. These students could have studied at a conventional university in their home town, but preferred to study at a distance. At the same time this was the only way for them to study parallel to their professional lives and partly "at a pace of their own choosing" (**Shale 1987, p. 10**).

Nearly every second student came from the State of North Rhine-Westphalia were the FeU has its headquarters. It is noticeable that, in general, the distribution of the number of new enrollees of the different States of the FRG are reflected in the statistics of the graduates. The graduation rates are to a large degree independent of the regional origin of the students. Graduates who lived in States with study centers had no better graduating rates than those students who lived in States without study centers (the FRG is a federal state and for this reason study centers are not located in all of the States).

The first enrollees have the highest graduation rates. Nearly every fifth full-time student who was enrolled in 1975 earned a degree in 'Economics'. For the enrollees of later years the graduation rate has dropped. However, we expect this rate for recent full-time enrollees will be approximately 10 - 12 %.

The graduating rate for part-time students is significantly lower than for full-time students (a full-time student is expected to have a full workload with 40 hours a week and a part-time student is expected to have only a half of this workload). Some of the students registered earlier are still studying for a degree. For this reason we expect that less than 10 % of the part-time students will pass the final exams at the FeU.

The graduating rates at the FeU verify (with the exception of full-time students, which were enrolled in 1975) that "most of the students at the FernUniversität do not pass the final exams because they drop out in the beginning of their studying" (**BARTELS & Willén 1985, p. 5**). Only a few of the students reach their longed-for `Diplom'. Obviously full-time students in general have the considerably better graduation chances than part-time students, although these students actually are the target group of the FeU.

The `Diplom' programs in the FRG are similar to higher degree programs of the Anglo-Saxon countries. As Rumble (1982, p. 107) pointed out, post-graduate programs at the Britsh Open University (UKOU) are "as `elitist' as any in Britain". The retention rates in the Master of Business Administration program at Deakin University "are high, as would be expected from the highly competitive entry, of the order of 90 %" (**Jevons 1984, p. 357**). If we compare our graduate statistics with those of other Distance Teaching Universities (DTU's) with higher degree programs, we must have the following in mind: At other DTU's it is the exception for students to finish their study with a Masters degree (**BYNNER 1986, HARRY 1986**), which is the first academic degree at German universities.

On average, full-time students of the FeU graduated after 10.7 semesters, but on average part-time students did not needed double the amount of time. Rather, they graduated after 14.0 semesters. Our full-time students tend to need the same number of semesters for earning a degree as students at conventional universities.

At the beginning of their study, 37 % of the female and 79 % of the male graduates had a full-time job. Towards the end of the course, however, only 11 % of the women and 56 % of the men had a full-time job while studying. While most of the male part-time students had a full-time job at the beginning (98 %), the situation was different in the case of the former full-time students. In many cases women as well as men reduced their workload in their jobs. At the beginning of their distance studies 57 % of the full-time students also had a full-time job, but during the course of studies this was reduced to 20 %.

It is interesting to note that having a full-time job while studying at a distance had no significant influence on the length of study for full-time or part-time students. These findings on the time needed to get a degree are surprising in the light of our drop-out studies in the past. These studies indicate that a full-time job seems to be incompatible with full-time studies at the FeU, as evidenced by the fact that most of these students dropped out very early in the course of their studies (**BARTELS & FRITSCH 1976**).

Graduates who studied exclusively at a distance finished their studies faster than those who first studied a greater or lesser part of their course at a conventional university. Every third male (36 %), but more than every second female graduate (51 %) in the past had not had any previous study experience.

The age of the graduates was very dependent on their matriculation status. Full-time students earned their degree at an average age of thirty years, while the part-time students were 37 years old when they completed their degree.

Initial study goals

Initially, the graduates of the FeU attached greater importance (57 %) to the goal of developing their potential as a person (self-development) than the goal of gaining better professional qualifications; 43 % had the opposite priority. These results are nearly identical to those found at the UKOU (**SWIFT 1982**). At the UKOU 56 % of all graduates preferred self-development goals, and 44 % job/career goals.

The study goals of the FeU graduates are gender specific. Female graduates preferred self-development goals (61 %) more often than male graduates (56 %).

Graduates, who preferred self-development goals as opposed to job/career goals in most cases achieved these goals (81 %) after graduating. The same is true for only 46 % of those graduates who preferred job/career goals.

If we look exclusively at the job/career goals, we find that female graduates more often (70 %) than men (65 %) agree to at least one of seven items which list job/career factors as very important for their decision to study at the FeU (at the UKOU the reverse is true: women 66 %, men 75 % (SWIFT 1982)). On the other hand men more often (46 %) preferred items like 'promotion', 'financial benefits from higher qualifications' and/or 'a new job' than women (44 %). Female graduates of the FeU obviously more often have general job/career goals, while male graduates are much more orientated to specific promotion goals.

Occupation after graduating

In comparison to their fellow students at conventional universities the transition into professional life for the FeU graduates is in general less problematic because most of our graduates already had a job while studying at a distance.

In the first half of the year 1985, when our research was carried out, only 3.3 % of the graduates said they were unemployed. Ninety-three percent of the male and 51 % of the female graduates were working full-time. Another 19 % of the women worked part-time, but only 3 % of the men did so. Every fourth female graduate (23 %) was a housewife. In comparison to male graduates, female graduates are working not so often in a job.

All graduates, who have been unemployed during distance studies, are now on full-time jobs. The qualifications they earned at the FeU have opened a new career to them. Currently unemployed graduates had not worked during their studies.

Those housewives, who did not work during their distance studies are in 44 % of the cases in the same position after graduation. Our research findings show that most of these housewives are looking for a job too.

If we classify those housewives who are looking for a job as unemployed (all male graduates do so in general), the rate of unemployment among the women would rise to 19 %. In contrast to the unemployment rate of 3 % for the men it is obvious that female graduates have much more difficulties finding a first job, although they have the same formal qualifications.

Nearly all graduates who did not work during their studies were looking for a job after graduation. Female graduates encounter significantly more problems in finding a job than male graduates. Only 18 % of the women but 44 % of the men had absolutely no difficulties to find employment. While age is irrelevant for the men in finding a job, it is a problem for women. The younger the women the more problems they face in trying to find a first job. Eight percent of the women who are younger than 32 years but 33 % of the older women had no problems finding employment after graduation.

In comparison to the original job position of the graduates we can emphasize that in general the number of higher positions has increased after getting a degree. Two out of three graduates advanced to higher job positions after graduating at the FeU, female graduates more often (76 %) than male graduates (64 %). In addition, 12 % of the women and 34 % of the men are to a large extent in the same position, 4 % now hold lower level jobs. In most cases (70 %) of occupational advancement the graduates said that the promotion was the result of their distance studies, the other 30 % thought that the promotion was independent of earning a degree. Ninety-one percent of those graduates who had change on the job based on the FeU degree are now in a better professional position. The same is true only for 40 % of those graduates who said their job change was independent of their degree.

In general we have found that the degree of the FeU is like a 'Diplom' of conventional FRG universities, because most of the graduates experienced no difference between both degrees in the labour market. They feel that the FeU degree is fully accepted in the labour market. Some employers even prefer graduates of the FeU because they have the reputation of working harder than graduates from conventional universities.

There is an interesting development to note. Most of the graduates who were employed during their studies on professional and executive levels of the civil service found after graduation that the degree did not open further career prospects. If these graduates fail to upgrade their position within the next few years, it would

only be fair in the future to warn potential students who are working for the government not to study at a distance if their sole motivation for getting a degree is their hope of promotion.

For female graduates (70 %), in contrast to the men (51 %), the FeU degree is the most important qualification for their job. In addition, women are convinced more often (47 %) than men (38 %) that the `Diplom' is absolutely necessary to do the work in the job. We therefore have to ask the question: Do working women in comparison to men the more qualified occupations or do they need higher qualifications to start a new job? Female graduates of the FeU are more often beginners in their jobs than the men. It is a well-known fact (**SCHMERL et al 1983**) that female beginners in general need a higher qualification to get a job than is the case for men.

The level of income has increased for most of the graduates. More than 71 % of the men and 85 % of the women now receive a higher salary in comparison to the time before finishing the study. Studying at the FeU thus was financially profitable for the graduates. But we have to mention that men in average receive higher saleries than women. Every second male graduate has an income of 65,000 DM or more a year, every sixth even more than 100,000 DM (32 % of the men aged 38 years or older). Among the female graduates 14 % have an income higher than 65,000 DM and less than 100,000 DM. None of the women is in the income group above 100,000 DM. The highest incomes we found among the men older than 38 years.

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